# WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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What a seductive topic!  When Gus Nelson invited me to be here today, following Fred Holper on what we can learn and should be learning from the mega-churches, he wrote a full page, outlining the reasons why I should be the person to address this topic.  In the process he wrote a pretty good outline of what I could say.  And I thought maybe the successful church in the 21st century will listen to people like Gus Nelson instead of visiting experts… a mantel I deplore.

If all politics is local — ecclesiastics is even more so.  What churches are and do has to do not only

with eternals like proclamations, community, but also with context. And you, not I, know your context. I know my context pretty thoroughly. I also know that it is not everybody's — anybody 'else's' as a matter of fact.

The broader context, at least form my angle of vision, is not pretty. Everybody seems to agree these days that the church, particularly the mainline church, is in a lot of trouble. My own denomination continues to decline numerically (and we Americans seem to only measure and evaluate things on the basis of numbers). In any event, numerically we seem to be in crisis. Someone is always sitting down with a calculator and figuring out that at the present rate of membership loss, factoring in birth and death rates, the last living

Presbyterian will expire sometime in the year 2,117.

That’s not serious, of course. The picture is more complicated than that. Membership loss is not an even, across the board phenomenon. Some denominations are growing. The Southern Baptists seem to be doing all right. Pentecostals are doing just fine. The Catholics also seem to be okay, the current leadership crisis notwithstanding. Ideologies of the right always try to argue that it’s about “creeping liberalism” — that good, salt-of-the-earth, middleclass Americans are essentially conservative and when the denominations were captured by the liberals in the 60’s; Presbyterian’s quit their local churches and became Southern Baptists. That’s simply not true. We know now

beyond a doubt that people do not quit and join churches on this basis of the so-called liberal/conservative divide. Recent research by Andrew Greely, who is a distinguished sociologist when he is not writing racy novels about priests, thoroughly debunks the liberal-conservative myth of church membership analysis. What it's about, Greely proves, is about birth rates. Conservatives have more babies than liberals. Which is beyond my expertise. Greely argues that conservative Protestants are less comfortable with artificial contraception and cove come to birth control methods much more slowly than more progressive Protestants. Whatever the reason, there are fewer mainline babies born per 100 mainline adults so we could solve this dilemma by having bigger families. The other thing we could do is start more new

churches.  That, I think, is how the Southern Baptists are doing it.  It is how we Presbyterians used to do it.  From colonial days onward, denominations grew by sending missionary evangelists to where people were moving and establishing congregations.  That's how we did it the last time in _____any of us was growing New Church Development.  That's how I began my ministry, by the way:  called and paid by the Board of National Mission.  I knocked on doors in a community where there was no Presbyterian church and organized one.  It's still there, by the way.  Why can't we do that today?  Well, one reason is financial.  $100,000 used to be enough to establish a ministry in a community for 3 years, rent a house, space for an office, and down payment on 4 acres of property, with more left

over.  To do that today in Chicago costs more than a million dollars.  And no denomination has that kind of money.

So we're losing members as they die or fall away by attrition.  And we're not replacing them by births or by organizing new churches.  So, what are to do? Well, one thing might be to ask if the model of the church we currently have is the only one that will work…The neighborhood model worked very well for two centuries, worked in cities so long as there were coherent neighborhoods.  What we have now, of course, is an abundance of real estate and literally thousands of old building, most of them in need of repair and renovation; housing congregations from 10 to 25% the size they used to be…with very little hope of long-term survival.  We

will, of course, keep trying to figure it out, hoping that suddenly the families with children will return and begin a Sunday school again and a youth program.  But maybe, just maybe, the model of neighborhood church with a single pastor serving a congregation of 300 to 500 people in a Victorian style building…maybe we need to look long and hard at that and see if there might be another way to be church in the 21st century.  Or to put it more biblically, too see if the Spirit isn't leading us to forget about the things of old and open our eyes the new thing God is doing.

In the meantime, we will have churches to serve and people to love and faith to nurture and mission to do.  And although we don't hear nearly as much about it as we should, there are many, many

faithful churches doing a faithful job of being the body of Christ in the world which is, after all, our job description — that the post script he added once about being salt and light — two provocative and serviceable metaphors as we thing about being church in the future.

Meanwhile, there is the church as it is — “The thing itself,” as King Lear put it.  Who doesn’t love it and hate it?  Who among us hasn’t been engaging in a “lover’s quarrel” with the church over the years — as Robert Frost said he had with the world?

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That was 21 centuries ago.  If the church's life and mission is shaped by its context, the starting point for an exploration of future forms for the church begin with at least an acknowledgement of the particularities of our context and that brings us to the ever-present designation — "post modernity." Those who know us best are telling us that we live in unique time:  times very different from those simpler days where we came from, times perhaps radically defined by what happened to on September 11, 2001.

What is post modernity?  Princeton's Stacy Johnson says post modernity has "withdrew credibility from meta-narratives."  [See *Interpretations*_____]  The old over arching myths, "How the West was won" for instance:  or the inexorable rise and dominance

of Western Christianity for instance, have been shown not to be wholly adequate  There is, instead, a sense of newness, of being in a new place, or need new intellectual categories, new vocabulary, new structures.  Religious pluralism — once a safe abstraction, has become a powerful reality — every single day since 9/11.  Johnson says we're a lot like the earliest Christians in the first century "when both church and world were learning about what it meant to be Christian."

Another way to describe the particularities of our situation is proved by Canadian Douglas John Hall who talks about the ***End of Christendom and the Future Christianity (Christian Mission and Modern Culture)*** The establishment of Christianity and the Christian church is over, Hall announces.

No more assumptions, no more privileges, no more automatic status.

It's not that we live in a secular, godless world. Quite the opposite, seems to be the case. Deity is very big business. Spirituality is where it's at. Check your local bookstore and see the size of the Religion and Spirituality shelves. We live in very religious times, but our world, finally, is one of many acceptable and accepted alternatives…

And it seems to me to be imperative that we know who we are, what we believe and what church is suppose to be…with an urgency perhaps absent since the first century, or at least at times when we were under direct assault, but the Third Reich, for instance, or Leninist/Stalinist Communist

T**otalitarianism**. It seems to me that whatever the church of the future will look like it will have to take its teaching ministry much more seriously than it has for a very long time…beginning where it has always been best — interpersonally, in our homes and if the post modern family is really in as much trouble as it seem to be, then we need to come up with another pedagogical context — Grandparents, for instance: certainly church school. Young people are interested in and willing to be committed to a cause that is hopeful. If you don't believe that take some time and read the lyrics of the enormously famous rock group U2, written by Bono, and higher education: We simply must find a way to recover a teaching, mentoring presence on campuses and in the lives of young people as their intellectual and emotional and spiritual life —

structures and proclivities are being put in place. And Adult Education — basic stuff:  basic Bible and Theology.  When it is tried, seriously and creatively, it works!  (See our Academy of Faith and Life)

The metaphors Jesus employed to give his followers something of a clue about their future — were basic, creative, and enormously evocative.

INSERT – Salt and Light (p.10)

We've thought a little about the need for the 21st century church to learn anew how to say what it believes and how to teach what it believes to its own adults and children. [In Italy recently, I was standing in the back of the church of San Franesco in Areezo, listening to the end of the service, watching people come and go, when I saw a sweet but provocative act. A young father holding what appeared to be an 18 month-old in his arms, his son; stood beside us watching and listening. And as he began to leave he crossed himself, and then crossed his son, and kissed the tips of his fingers and pressed them gently to his son's lips. And I thought, this is the way faith is communicated…we have to learn from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, something like that gesture, instead of relying on confirmation class and catechisms.

And preaching in the 21st century, preaching in and to post modern congregations, remembering the time of meta-narratives is over.  As Ron Allen put it, “Post modern people typically eschew understanding of the world that are universal, assert relativity in every form of awareness…” Post Modern preachers, Allen teaches, listen before speaking and when preaching will be dialogue, conversational, bring the congregation’s perspectives right into the sermon, if he/she hopes to be heard.  The Post Modern preacher must know a lot, read a lot outside of the compartment of life we used to know as religious because all the compartments into which we used to divide and organize life are gone now.

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The world desperately needs…

What will a successful, faithful church in the 21st century look like? I'm not sure we can know that. What we can be sure of is that if it looks the same as it does today it will be in even more trouble.

In fact, having spent all this time thinking with you about a successful church, let me say what we all know, namely that the church is not called to be successful. The church is called to be faithful. If by success we mean numerical and financial strength, it ought to be clear from our own history that faithfulness is not a guarantee of success. In fact, at times and places in Christian history, faithfulness has resulted in what could only be called failure in numerical and financial terms. After all, our Lord's faithful obedience led him to the cross, and

ecclesiastical faithfulness has led to persecution, suffering and death, during our own life times in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin, and Kruchev, in China, in America in the 60’s and the 70’s, and today in parts of Africa and Asia.

Success and faithfulness are not the same thing unless, of course, faithfulness is what success means in Christological terms — which is what I believe the truth of the matter is.

A successful, faithful church will first be radically inclusive.  It will love the world passionately.  It will know that it exists, not for it’s own sake, but for the world’s sake.  It will, therefore, be willing to spend itself, its energy, and its resources for the sake of the world.

Learning how to do that will be its first priority.

Because it loves the world so profoundly, it will be profoundly worldly.  It will seek to understand the world and talk about the world, and study what is happening in the world, and on occasion, after it has done its homework, and truly understands the world, and after it has studied scripture and prayed long and hard, it will say a word to the world about things Jesus cared about — like the excluded, like the sick, like the children.

So it will be an interesting and lively place.  It will remember and preserve its own traditions insofar as those traditions bear witness to the truth of the Gospel.

It will understand that postmodern men and women are no longer eagerly awaiting the church's proclamation, so it will be creative about its witness.

A successful, faithful post modern church will get honest about its captivity to its own real estate and its captivity to a model of the parish that no longer works. It will be brave, or simply wise enough to deal with its assets, to sell old First, Second, and Third Presbyterian Church buildings because all three are small and declining and their upkeep is going to kill their aging congregations. Have a great celebration of a faithful 1 ½ century run, and then, with a commission of their smartest, most worldly members, create a new church, with a new

building constructed with the actual needs of their people in mind. And it may or may not look like a church but that doesn't matter and everybody will _____. And that new church will devote itself to worship and the teaching of its children, and the care of its members and the needs of the world around it. It might even call itself the Church of the Incarnation.

And it will be as compelling as Jesus was because it will do what he did. It will, for instance, be as radically inclusive as he was. It will attend to those who are marginalized and shut out — by the church and the society. It will take risks to be inclusive even when the world will not always understand. It will be hospitable in the best biblical, Christocentric sense of the word. Its doors will be open. It will

tend to the needy.  It will care about health and healing — as he did.  It will be in the business of mending relationships and practicing forgiveness.

And it will care about the children and their health and education and their safety.  It will be compelling.  Its worship will never be boring.

Now, not all of us can participate in something like that.  For better or worse, we have existing institutions to serve and maintain and some of them are further along in their incarnational ministries than others, and some of them are stuck in a survival mode and scared to death.

But all of them — have people who want to be faithful followers and want the church to be faithful

and so each of us can, I believe, nudge the church along and push it more deeply into the world Christ calls it — and us — to love and serve.

Salt and Light ~

They penetrate, change, add zest, illuminate, and show the way home.

The gracious invitation of the Gospel in every age, every culture, every church, is to allow God’s love in Jesus Christ to transform lives and institutions. And so, perhaps, what we most need to do is to invite Jesus in:  to listen to him, to do what he calls us to do, and be what he calls us to be.